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TAGS: [IZ](#) [KDEM](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#)
SUBJECT: MINORITIES FIND SECURITY IN KURDISTAN BUT
EMIGRATION CONTINUES

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Classified By: Acting Political Counselor John Fox for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Christian and Sabeen-Mandean leaders based in the Kurdistan region report that the flow of internally displaced persons (IDPs) into their communities from the rest of Iraq has decreased to a trickle -- an indicator, they believe, that sectarian violence targeting minorities throughout Iraq has declined. These minority leaders also note that the post-2003 influx of IDPs has swollen the size of their communities in the Kurdistan region. They point out that these greater numbers, combined with poor Kurdish language skills, minimal economic opportunities, and a perception of societal discrimination, have convinced many minority IDPs that emigration abroad remains their best option, despite the greater security and religious freedom that they enjoy in the Kurdistan region. End summary.

The KRG: Safehaven for Minorities

¶2. (SBU) Since the onset of sectarian violence in 2003, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been a safe-haven for Iraq's Christian and Sabeen-Mandean communities, affording them greater security and religious freedom than elsewhere in Iraq. POLOFF traveled to the Kurdistan region for three days to meet with political and religious leaders representing a wide range of Iraqi minority communities living in the Kurdistan region, including Chaldeans, Assyrians, Armenians, Evangelicals, and Sabeen-Mandean. These leaders unanimously report that the northward flow of IDPs from their communities in Baghdad and Basra has dramatically decreased. They attribute this to the stabilization of security in the rest of Iraq. However, they note that past migration has resulted in large population increases for minority communities living in the Kurdistan region.

¶3. (C) Bishop Matran Raban, who heads the Chaldean Church in Erbil, estimated that the total number of Christians living in the Kurdistan region had gone from 28,000 in 1991 to more than 150,000 today. He told POLOFF on May 18 that the number of Christians living in the predominately Christian neighborhood of Ankawa in the capital city of Erbil had expanded five-fold, from 5,000 to 25,000. In a meeting on May 19, Father Isah Dawood Philip of the Assyrian Church told POLOFF that 3,000-4,000 Assyrian Christians had moved to the Kurdistan region since 2003, expanding their total numbers to 15,000, while leaders of the Armenian community reported that there are now 400 Armenians living in Erbil, 90% of whom are originally from Baghdad.

¶4. (C) Minority community leaders were unanimous that, in addition to enjoying stable security, they suffered no overt interference in the practice of their religion within the

Kurdistan region. Bishop Raban provided photos of a religious procession he had led on May 15 involving thousands of Christians in the village of Aladdin to celebrate the festival of Sultana Mahdoct, for which the Kurdish peshmerga forces had been instrumental in providing security. Father Ghasan Yousif Audish of the Evangelical Church reported that, despite past problems with the more established Chaldean and Assyrian Churches, the evangelical community was allowed to conduct its services in peace. Father Ghasan even reported that a handful of Iraqi Muslims had sought refuge at his church and converted to Christianity. Father Ghasan complained that the KRG had not yet officially registered the evangelical church despite his efforts over the past year and a half, a step that would allow them to officially conduct weddings and baptisms. (Comment: The government's delay in registration may be related to the unease expressed by the mainline Christian churches at proselytizing. End comment.) Salman Sada, the Vice President of the Sabeian-Mandean Culture Society, even praised KRG President Masoud Barzani for his awareness and sensitivity to the issues facing their community.

Security a Necessary, but Not Sufficient Reason to Stay

¶5. (C) Despite the recognition on the part of Christian and Sabeian-Mandean communities that they are the beneficiaries of a more secure and tolerant environment, minority leaders commented that many in their communities are still seeking to emigrate rather than return to their homes in Baghdad or remain in the Kurdistan region. For example, Salman Sada

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reported that the Sabeian-Mandean community in the Kurdistan region had at one point reached 300 families, but that 200 had subsequently left Iraq. When asked if he too would like to leave Iraq, Salman replied that he would "be the first to go" and that the leadership of the Sabeian-Mandean community was no longer encouraging members to relocate to the Kurdistan region, but rather to go abroad. Likewise, Boghos Kurkjian, a local Armenian leader, noted that despite being in the Kurdistan region for two years, the 400-strong Armenian community had not decided whether to build an Armenian Church to service the community because they had not decided whether to remain in Erbil or emigrate for economic reasons. Chaldean and Assyrian leaders noted that members of their communities (especially young people) were actively seeking better economic opportunities abroad as well.

¶6. (C) When asked if any in their communities were seeking a return to their homes in Baghdad or elsewhere, minority leaders responded that the numbers were very small. Chaldean Bishop Raban noted that perhaps 20 families that had lived in the Ankawa neighborhood had chosen to return, but that those who attempted to go back faced renewed threats of violence in their old neighborhoods. Boghos Kurkjian indicated that he and others within the Armenian community had sold their homes and businesses and thus had nothing to return to in Baghdad. Salman Sada described how a car bomb had destroyed his Baghdad home. (Note: According to Iraqi National Police statistics obtained by the U.S. military, the total number of Christian returnees to Baghdad is 161 families as of February ¶2009. End note.) At the same time, minority leaders were equally adamant that while the relative peace and freedom in the Kurdistan region was a necessary factor to remain in the area, it was not a sufficient one for many in their communities.

¶7. (C) Christian and Sabeian-Mandean leaders identified a combination of three factors that drove members of their community to leave the Kurdistan region for third countries. The first was that IDPs who fled from places like Baghdad and Basra lacked the Kurdish language skills that would allow them to function effectively in Kurdish society. Salman Sada

described how his son was beaten at school for failing to speak Kurdish in the classroom. The second reason was that the Kurdistan region (where 60% of employment is in the public sector) lacked sufficient economic opportunities for the greatly expanded minority community. Both Bishop Raban and Father Isah described well-intentioned KRG attempts to settle IDPs in over 100 reconstructed rural villages, only for the new residents to find themselves without the agricultural skills to make them economically viable. (Note: With quick reaction funds (QRF), RRT Erbil has initiated a number of projects to assist minority IDPs in the Kurdistan region, including Kurdish language classes and small loans to entrepreneurs. End note.) Finally, minority leaders complained that the increasing influence of Islam in Iraqi politics had left minorities feeling as though they were second-class citizens, even in the Kurdistan region. For example, Bishop Raban complained that the Iraqi Constitution does not allow any law to conflict with Sharia and also that Iraqi children are automatically converted to Islam if one of their parents chooses to convert, a complaint that minority leaders in Baghdad, including the Minister of Human Rights Wijdan Salim, have also voiced in the past weeks.

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Division Over the Solution

18. (C) Minority leaders in the Kurdistan region agree that the Government of Iraq is not sufficiently responsive to their concerns, but they were deeply divided on how best to address this challenge. For example, Bishop Raban advocated greater Christian efforts to reintegrate themselves into Iraqi society, arguing that Christians and other minorities needed to stop isolating themselves from the wider community by demanding quota seats in Parliament and sealing themselves off in exclusively Christian neighborhoods. At the same time, Raban believed that the Christian community needed to stop squabbling among itself and work to unite as a group, a point also made in a recent conversation with Chaldean Member of Parliament Ablahad Sawa. On the other side of the spectrum, Dr. Saroud Maqdasy of the Assyrian Democratic Party (ADM) argued that quotas were integral to guaranteeing the political voice of minorities, and that minorities needed their own autonomous region distinct from the KRG as the only way for them to guarantee the viability of their communities. Dr. Saroud stated that the ADM would refuse to unite with other Christian parties and would instead seek to be the only voice of the Assyrian people.

Comment

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19. (C) It is an encouraging sign that the flow of minority IDPs into the Kurdistan region has abated, even with the recent increase in violence in Baghdad during the month of April. However, it is clear that many minority IDPs are in a holding pattern in the Kurdistan region, waiting for an opportunity to emigrate, primarily due to the cultural and economic challenges that they face. While the KRG has openly welcomed minority IDPs from the rest of Iraq, it is not clear whether the Kurdistan economy will be able to sustain the thousands of non-Kurdish speaking newcomers. RRT Erbil has made efforts to address some of the issues facing IDPs, but only sustained action on the part of the KRG and the Government of Iraq will convince minority communities to remain in Iraq. Unfortunately, internal political conflicts within the minority community still seriously hamper their ability to mobilize for a common agenda to catalyze GOI action on minority concerns. End comment.
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